

# ‘George Washington in Nude Pollie Panic’: debating classical art in the USA

Alastair Blanshard

Who could possibly hate classical art? We might find it a little dull or conventional, but no one would claim that it was dangerous. Yet in nineteenth-century America, the circles of Washington’s political elite were abuzz with the idea that the celebration of ancient art posed a threat to the safety of the nation. Here Alastair Blanshard shows just why people felt anxiety about classical art. For some, ancient art, especially art featuring classical nudity, was morally corrupting. Others objected to the anti-democratic values it seemed to celebrate. It was a topic on which everyone seems to have had an opinion.

## Corrupted by the classical past?

Why do republics fail? Congressman Smith from Alabama thought he knew the answer – too much classical art. According to Smith, these monuments that glorified the achievements of aristocratic men sapped the life out of every democratic republic that history had produced. These artworks actively undermined the values of the state. Athens, Rome, and France had all given way to despotism because they had paid too much attention to classical art. Classical art had no place in a democracy if it wished to have any chance of survival.

It’s a bold theory. To us, it seems insane. Is the congressman really suggesting that it was admiration of the Parthenon that killed Athenian democracy rather than the Macedonian phalanx? Yet to his audience in the 1820s, Smith’s arguments had a distinct ring of plausibility. Smith’s warning came as part of a heated series of debates about the nature of public art and monuments to decorate Washington DC.

## Washington: built in the image of Greece and Rome

Walking down the National Mall in Washington, it is hard to imagine that anyone in government in the US ever objected to classical art. Everywhere one looks, one sees monuments that copy classical prototypes. Lincoln sits memorialized in a pose borrowed from Pheidias’ statue of Zeus at Olympia. Porticos and columns adorn almost every public building. The Supreme Court building was designed to be ‘the most perfect classical temple ever built’. The Washington Monument is an obelisk not because of an American interest in Egyptian monuments, but rather because Augustus adorned Rome with an obelisk captured from Egypt and anything that was good enough for Augustus was certainly good enough for America. Washington is a new capital that desperately wants to be older than it is. In looking to Rome, the city of Washington continues an American love affair with antiquity that began with the founding fathers and continued well into the twentieth century.

Yet, just because fans of classical art won the day does not mean that we should forget that their victory was hard-fought and often achieved by the narrowest of margins. Those silent blocks of marble hide violent objections, acrimonious debates, and reluctant compromises. Congressman Smith was not the only one

who felt threatened by classical art. Davy Crockett is now more famous for his raccoon-skin hat and his death at the Alamo, but, during his time in Congress, he also opposed the Romanization of the American republic. He was particularly scornful of a project to erect a statue of Washington in Roman dress:

*I do not like the statue of Washington in the State House. They have a Roman gown on him and he was an American; that ain’t right... He belonged to his country – heart, soul, and body and I don’t want any other country to have any part of him – not even his clothes.*

Crockett spoke for many and, during his time in Congress, he was able to stop a number of classicizing projects.

## Baring (almost) all: the immorality of the classical nude

Statues of American presidents and founding fathers in Roman dress seem to have been particularly troublesome. Such statues are dotted around the US, but wherever they were erected they seem to have been a cause for debate and controversy. Part of the problem seems to have been squaring their iconography with democratic sentiment. All too often, these statues make their subject look like a god or an emperor. ‘He wasn’t Jupiter, he was just a man’, one critic remarked about a statue of Thomas Jefferson that shows him seated in Roman garb.

The problem was only exacerbated if the statue showed off any flesh. Classical art was not only potentially poisonous to political ideals, it was also potentially corrupting to morals. Rome was just as famous for the orgy as it was for its experiments in republican government. This certainly caused a problem for the sculptor, Horatio Greenough. Despite working

in Italy, Greenough thought he knew American taste. At the start of his career, he'd attracted a number of successful commissions from prominent individuals. His saccharine-sweet statues of children had been much admired. As a result, he was ill-prepared for the controversy that erupted when his statue of George Washington was unveiled in 1841.

### **Embarrassing eroticism: blushing at Washington's flesh**

The statue had been commissioned by Congress to celebrate the anniversary of Washington's birth and it was proposed that the statue be erected in the centre of the Rotunda of the Capitol building. It is hard to imagine a more prominent position for a piece of public art. This was a commission that was supposed to speak to the history, traditions, and the glorious future of the new American republic.

Greenough produced a statue that seated a half-naked Washington on a throne. In his left hand, Washington holds out a sheathed sword. His right arm is raised pointing to the sky. For Greenough, this was an image about a warrior putting away his weapons and starting the process of nation-building. For his critics, it was a symbol of depravity that mocked the man it proposed to honour.

Women complained that they found the exposed body confronting. One found herself blushing when viewing the statue in the company of men. Such attitudes caught Greenough by surprise. For him, there was nothing erotic about 'ancient nudity'. Washington is only partly naked and, in any case, the uncovered body was supposed to be admired. It was supposed to promote emulation, not sexual feelings. These classical bodies were infused with an aura that allowed them to stand as a de-eroticized sign of beauty. Didn't they? The problem was that viewers refused to buy into the distinction that Greenough wanted them to make. Where Greenough wanted them to see marble, their minds kept superimposing uncovered, desirable flesh. It would be a mistake to think that Greenough did not know that such projections were probably inevitable – indeed, they form an integral part of the game of the nude – but, it was the fact that they were vocalized as part of a negative response to the work that seems to have caught him out.

Following the outcry, it was re-latively quickly de-cided not to exhibit the statue in the Capitol building. It was initially moved outside to the east lawn of the Capitol before moving finally to the Smithsonian where it can be found today.

### **America's Aphrodite, clothed in Christianity**

Sculptors learnt a lesson from the reaction to Greenough's *Washington*. There were limits to America's infatuation with the classics and that infatuation tended to flag when naked bodies were about. If classical nudity was going to be displayed, it needed extra butt-ressing. If it was going to be OK to fancy naked statues, a little bit more work was required. Take, for example, the tremendous amount of effort put into the framing of Hiram Powers' *Greek Slave*. This completely nude statute is a much more daring project than Greenough's *Washington*.

At first glance, it looks like a typical classicizing statue. Statues of naked women (as opposed to goddesses) are comparatively rare in the ancient world, but the form and aesthetic all hark back to classical precedents. It is supposed to remind you of the famous Aphrodite of Cnidus, antiquity's most desired statue. But look a little closer, there is something dangling from her wrist. It's a tiny crucifix. This is no naked pagan, but a good Christian girl exposed not in the slave markets of ancient Rome, but of modern Constantinople. She's a *modern* Greek slave. In transporting the statue from antiquity to the more recent past, Powers hoped to slough off any associations with the corrupt morality of the ancient world.

For us, the crucifix is easy to miss. But viewers of the statue were given a guide-book that drew their attention to this crucial (literally!) detail. The plight of Greek slaves under the Turks was explained. In addition, quotes from religious leaders were added to the pamphlet to defend her nakedness. Unitarian minister Orville Dewey declared that the girl's faith clothed her and protected her from 'every profane eye'. Greenough had relied on European art-historical traditions and notions of taste to excuse his nudity. Here a more robust defence was mounted relying on the opinions of contemporary moral leaders.

It seems to have worked. In spite of an initially mixed reaction to the figure's nudity, especially in Europe, though even the governor of Vermont declared it 'obscene', The *Greek Slave* was ultimately a tremendous success. The *Boston Daily Advertiser* called it 'the most beautiful statue' in the world and critics rushed to agree. A large number of copies of the statue were made. The piece established Powers' reputation.

Looking at naked classical bodies has always involved an element of danger. The myth of Actaeon torn apart by his hunting dogs for accidentally catching Artemis bathing reminds us about this. Nineteenth-century debates in the US revived the charge. They ensured that classical dress was never a form of wallpaper, but rather something always to be watched and policed. Those immobile statues could bite back.

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